



2018 Open the Government Research Report



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Overview and Strategic Environment

Recent research for Open the Government shows that there are opportunities on accountability issues. In this research, we were looking for areas of shared concern and consensus across party, as well as ways to engage voters more directly on matters of government oversight and accountability. Across party, the top concerns about government are that lawmakers and public officials do not play by the same rules that average people do, and lack of accountability. With these being the top concerns, this provides an opportunity to elevate support and engagement on accountability issues. But despite these being the top concerns about government, accountability/oversight/ethics is only a mid-level priority in how voters want public officials to spend their time in the context of other issues. This is not surprising when matched against other concerns like the economy, education and health care. However this attitude about accountability/oversight/ethics is in part because the electorate does not have much confidence in their own ability to hold elected officials accountable, and they worry that accountability efforts tend to fail more than they succeed. Even though the electorate does not believe they have much ability to hold elected officials accountable, voters believe that they — the voters — have the largest role in lawmaker accountability, more than other entities including the courts, government institutions, the media and NGOs. Additionally, the electorate would trust themselves the most — in addition to the courts — to hold lawmakers accountable. But even though skepticism exists, accountability is still viewed as a possible and worthy goal, with two-thirds of the electorate seeing accountability in government as possible rather than not possible.

Reflecting the concerns about lawmakers not playing by the same rules and lack of accountability, the most important personal outcomes from accountability, oversight and transparency are that fraud/abuse/corruption are rooted out, lawmakers and public officials follow the rule of law, and that lawmakers and public officials follow ethics requirements. These personal outcomes are generally consistent across party. From these outcome priorities, voters see the most compelling reasons for accountability are that lawmakers and public officials have to play by the same rules as citizens do, and that lawmakers and public officials are more likely to do what they said they will do.

For the more specific processes of oversight and transparency, the electorate sees those as potential paths to greater accountability for lawmakers and public officials, but particularly in the area of oversight, there is not a clear perception that oversight efforts are ways to legitimately investigate wrongdoing with concerns about partisan motivations, especially those of the other side. A plurality of the electorate (45%) views oversight efforts as ways to legitimately investigate cases of wrongdoing rather than partisan-motivated efforts (29%), with a significant percentage undecided on this question (26%). Even though a plurality has this perception, it is concerning that less than 50% views oversight as legitimate ways to investigate wrongdoing, with large percentages being undecided. With that context, a central focus of the messaging will need to be to define the value of oversight to get above 50% of voters saying oversight efforts are indeed a means to legitimately investigate wrongdoing. This presents a key opportunity.

In terms of areas within government needing more accountability, the largest percentages say that all need more accountability, but with Democrats singling out the White House more than other agencies in need of accountability. Additionally, while Republicans believe all areas in government need more accountability, they tend to focus on Congress needing more accountability compared to other specific areas. Nevertheless, the belief in the need for greater accountability in government is very much present and a shared concern across partisan divides.

In addition to the shared belief in the need for greater accountability in government, there is widespread belief in many of the core belief statements that are priorities for Open the Government, including the belief in the right to know what the government is doing, the harmful impact of secretive decision-making, and that greater accountability will improve lawmaker performance in other issue areas. However, reflecting the electorate's low confidence in their own ability to hold lawmakers accountable, the challenge is active engagement on the issues to have a meaningful impact. But the positive side is that voters believe they have the greatest role in making accountability a reality.

One of the first ways to bring about greater accountability is what can be done within the existing system. There is openness to the idea of new laws rather than enforcement of existing laws only, but the desire for new laws is driven more by Democrats than Republicans who tend to be resistant toward additional laws and more inclined to focus on enforcement. Nevertheless there is openness toward this concept, but potential new laws must be seen as ways to help legitimately investigate wrongdoing rather than partisan exercises. Secondly, even though non-governmental nonprofit organizations are not viewed as having the largest role nor the most trusted in holding lawmakers accountable, there is openness and potential interest if NGOs could offer ways to get involved to work toward greater accountability. Although the largest percentage is only "somewhat interested," rather than "very interested," this shows a level of interest and potential opportunity for Open the Government. Reflecting voters' perception that they have the largest role in holding lawmakers accountable, activities that would be the most interesting for becoming involved would be voting, followed by signing petitions, having the ability to comment on rules or regulations, and calling their Member of Congress.

The overall set of potential proposals tested in the research would be seen as helping raise the level of accountability and trust in government. Proposals that are seen as the most important from the list reflected the concern about lawmakers not playing by the same rules as citizens; require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards; ensure the government keeps records of officials business; prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about; and require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them. All of the proposals were generally seen as important to some extent, but with those proposals being a few examples of the priorities from the list. The proposals should be treated as "reasons to believe" and ways to help achieve greater accountability, and whenever possible, engage voters in a meaningful role and show how that is having a positive outcome in terms of implementation and enforcement.

General Views About Government

Concerns About Government

In terms of concerns about government, the top three are lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do (7.62), lack of accountability (7.59) and the way Congress spends my money (7.57).

Concerns about Government (scale of 1-9 with 1 being does not concern you at all, 5 neutral, 9 extremely concerning to you)	Mean
Lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do	7.62
Lack of accountability	7.59
The way Congress spends my money	7.57
Lack of compliance with ethics rules by lawmakers and public officials	7.41
Decisions being made in secret	7.40
Influence of special interests	7.31
Lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest that are not disclosed	7.26
Lack of enforcement of laws and regulations	7.19
Effectiveness of oversight of government activities	7.11
Your voice is not being heard	7.06
Career politicians	7.05
Partisanship	6.80
Whether I have unbiased information to make informed decisions	6.65
Ability to access government information	6.64
Too much power is concentrated in the executive branch	6.59
Not having a clear understanding of the legislative process	5.92

There are relatively few differences in concerns about government by party, and the top tier of concerns is relatively consistent across the political spectrum, although Democrats alone place *decisions being made in secret* (7.60) in their top tier of concerns. While a concern for other voter groups, it is not their top worry.

Concerns about government	Overall	R	Ind	D
Lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do	7.62	7.70	7.69	7.53
Lack of accountability	7.59	7.53	7.71	7.57
The way Congress spends my money	7.57	7.47	7.72	7.57
Lack of compliance with ethics rules by lawmakers and public officials	7.41	7.26	7.47	7.52
Decisions being made in secret	7.40	7.19	7.41	7.60

Concerns about government	Overall	R	Ind	D
Influence of special interests	7.31	7.27	7.46	7.25
Lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest that are not disclosed	7.26	7.10	7.37	7.36
Lack of enforcement of laws and regulations	7.19	7.51	6.80	7.25
Effectiveness of oversight of government activities	7.11	7.08	7.24	7.08
Your voice is not being heard	7.06	6.81	7.09	7.27
Career politicians	7.05	7.47	6.92	6.81
Partisanship	6.80	6.65	7.06	6.76
Whether I have unbiased information to make informed decisions	6.65	6.86	6.53	6.55
Ability to access government information	6.64	6.62	6.52	6.75
Too much power is concentrated in the executive branch	6.59	5.88	6.52	7.30
Not having a clear understanding of the legislative process	5.92	5.71	5.64	6.35

Accountability as a Priority

Although lack of accountability is a top concern about government generally that is shared across party, the concept of *accountability/oversight/ethics* is a mid-level priority in how voters want their public officials to spend time. At 13%, it is not in the top tier of priorities (health care 39%, economy 36%, national security 34%) but ranked higher than other issue priorities (energy 4%, funding for local projects 3%). This is not surprising when matched against other concerns like the economy, education and health care. As seen later in the survey, however, voters do believe that *If lawmakers and public official are accountable, it will improve their performance in issue areas like the economy, health care and education* (80-10 believe-do not believe). As shown in the next chart, this issue is ranked at a similar level across party.

Issues for Lawmakers to Spend Time on	Overall	R	Ind	D
Health Care	39	29	42	47
Economy	36	46	35	28
National Security	34	51	30	22
Crime and safety	26	25	25	28
Education	15	10	15	19
Jobs	14	12	14	16
Accountability/ethics/oversight	13	13	16	12
Environment/climate change	13	6	17	17
Energy	4	4	4	3
Funding for local projects in your area	3	2	3	3

Current Level of Trust in Government

Trust in government is low (4.17 on a scale of 1-9 with 1 being not trusted at all and 9 trusted a great deal), with Democrats having a slightly lower level of trust (4.14) than Republicans (4.52), but with independents having a much lower level of trust (3.82) than the other two parties. As one middle income voter in Pittsburgh described trust in government, “*My trust is gone, my faith. I used to think you could just vote and it would make a difference, and now I feel like there is so much corruption, I just, I don’t know.*”

Views about Accountability

Similar to the low level of trust in government, the electorate has low confidence in the current level of lawmaker accountability to citizens (4.44 on a scale of 1-9 with 1 being not accountable at all and 9 very accountable). Democrats (4.82) have a slightly higher confidence in the current accountability level of public officials than Republicans (4.45) or independents (3.93).

Current Level of Lawmaker Accountability to Citizens (scale of 1-9 with 1 being not accountable at all, 9 very accountable)	Overall	R	Ind	D
Mean	4.44	4.45	3.93	4.82

Ability to Hold Lawmakers and Public Officials Accountable

At 4.44, this is a low rating of the current state of accountability, but slightly better than the electorate’s overall trust in government (4.17). This view of accountability is largely a reflection of the electorate’s low confidence in how well they are able to hold lawmakers and public officials accountable (21-58 well-not well). Reflecting what we heard in the focus groups about independents having even lower confidence in the political process because they are not part of the two-party system, independents have a lower confidence in their ability to hold officials accountable (11-67 well-not well), compared to Republicans (23-61) and Democrats (28-50).

As we heard in the qualitative research, many people struggled to see how accountability was actionable. People had difficulty seeing how they personally had the ability to act, which distanced them from the issue. While participants generally thought the people should be providing oversight and accountability, as politicians are ultimately accountable to their constituents, many felt it was “*out of our hands.*”

Republican: All of these things seem so out of our hands. That’s what’s frustrating.

Independent: We get mad, but we get mad and nothing happens.

Republican: I think [lawmakers] need to be held accountable, but I’m not sure how you go about doing that.

In addition to low confidence in the ability to take action on accountability, there is also the perception across party that accountability efforts fail more than they succeed (72%) rather than succeed more often than they fail (17%).

Perceptions of Government Accountability Efforts	Overall	R	Ind	D
Succeed more often than they fail	17	19	10	20
Fail more often than they succeed	72	72	76	69

Who Has the Largest Role in Accountability

Even though they do not believe they have much ability to hold lawmakers accountable, voters believe they — the voters — have the largest role in lawmaker accountability (53%), followed by courts (36%), government institutions and agencies (32%), lawmakers and public officials (31%), media (24%) and NGOs being last (11%). Similarly, from the same list, the electorate would trust themselves — voters — the most (48%) and the courts (43%) to hold lawmakers accountable.

Accountability as a Possible Goal

Despite skepticism about trust in government and the ability to hold lawmakers accountable, voters see accountability in government as being possible and a worthwhile goal, with two-thirds of the electorate (62%) believing it is possible rather than not possible (23%).

Most Important Personal Outcomes from Accountability, Oversight, and Transparency

In terms of personal outcomes from government accountability, oversight and transparency, the top three were *fraud, abuse and corruption are rooted out* (7.78); *lawmakers and public officials follow the rule of law* (7.73), and *lawmakers and public officials follow ethics requirements* (7.69). As shown in the next chart, these are top personal outcomes across party. This reflects the concern about lack of accountability and lawmakers not playing by the same rules as average people do.

Personal outcomes (scale of 1-9 in terms of how important to you personally)	Overall	R	Ind	D
Fraud, abuse and corruption in government is rooted out	7.78	7.91	7.71	7.75
Lawmakers and public officials follow the rule of law	7.73	7.90	7.58	7.72
Lawmakers and public officials follow ethics requirements	7.69	7.89	7.60	7.60
Laws and regulations are fairly enforced	7.67	7.79	7.59	7.64
Your privacy rights and other rights are protected	7.67	7.76	7.51	7.73
Lawmakers and public officials cannot personally profit for positions of power	7.65	7.75	7.65	7.60
There is greater transparency in how your tax dollars are used	7.53	7.67	7.48	7.48
Government waste is cut	7.46	7.76	7.31	7.34

Our democracy works better	7.42	7.50	7.19	7.56
Checks and balances among the three branches of government are improved	7.40	7.45	7.35	7.41
You have access to unbiased information to make informed decisions	7.37	7.52	7.36	7.28
There is no foreign interference in our elections and government operations	7.34	7.25	7.20	7.56
Your voice is heard in government	7.31	7.41	7.25	7.31
The food you eat and products you buy are safer	7.26	7.05	7.27	7.45
Less influence of special interests	7.17	7.15	7.32	7.11

Most Compelling Reason for Accountability

Of a list of the most compelling reasons for accountability, the most compelling reason is *lawmakers and public officials have to play by the same rules as citizens do* (39%), followed by *lawmakers and public officials are more likely to do what they said they will do* (33%). As shown in the chart below, these are concepts that are effective with voters across the board.

Compelling Reason for Accountability	Overall	R	Ind	D
Means that lawmakers and public officials have to play by the same rules that citizens do	39	43	37	37
Means that lawmakers and public officials are more likely to do what they said they will do	33	35	32	32
Leads to a better functioning government	28	30	22	31
Helps build greater trust in government and the governing process	27	25	29	27
Leads to better representation of the people	26	27	25	26
Reduces the influence of special interests	22	19	27	21
Helps ensure people's voices are heard	20	18	20	21

The most compelling reasons for accountability are reflected in the descriptions of accountability that were given in the qualitative research:

Democrat: You really have to stand behind your decisions and make known why you made those decisions.

Democrat: Taking ownership of the decisions and living up to that because that impacts the people that you govern. And once you take that accountability, hold yourself to the same standards that you would expect the normal citizens to be held with.

Middle income: Because I think of myself as being an accountable person; I'm accountable to the Lord, I'm accountable to my wife, I'm accountable to my boss. So, when it comes to somebody that I've elected, I'm their boss, and if you don't do it my way, the way I was voting,

my reasoning was ... and you can say what you want about Trump, but I do like him on his TV show, "You're fired." If you're not going to be accountable to what our agreement was, I'm the one that's in charge, and you're fired.

Republican: It's the rules being applied evenly and fairly to all.

Independent: Accountability to me is doing what you say you're going to do.

Government Entities Needing Accountability

In terms of government agencies needing accountability, the overall electorate — including Republicans and independents — tends to see all needing more accountability (40%), more than focusing on single government entities like the White House (25%), Congress (18%), government agencies (5%), state and local government (5%) and judicial system (5%). However Democrats single out the White House (40%) more than any other entity, including the answer option of all needing more accountability (29%). Republicans think that all need more accountability (47%), but focus on Congress (23%) needing more accountability than the White House (10%).

In which areas within government is greater accountability needed the most?	Overall	R	Ind	D
All need more accountability	40	47	44	29
White House	25	10	22	40
Congress	18	23	16	16
Government agencies	5	7	5	4
Judicial system	5	6	5	3
State and local government	5	6	5	6

Oversight

Views of the effectiveness of oversight (4.34 on a scale of 1-9) are comparable to overall trust in government and the current level of accountability, being in a similar range. Both Democrats (4.60) and Republicans (4.51) have a slightly higher degree of confidence in the overall effectiveness of oversight compared to the overall electorate. Independents on the other hand have a lower level of confidence in the effectiveness of oversight (3.83).

How effective is oversight of government activities? (scale of 1-9 with 1 being not effective at all, 9 completely effective)	Overall	R	Ind	D
Mean	4.34	4.51	3.83	4.60

Most Compelling Reason for Oversight

For oversight, the most compelling reasons are that it would lead to greater accountability for lawmakers and public officials (58%) and help ensure laws and regulations are followed more closely and effectively (47%). As shown in the chart below, this is generally consistent across party.

Most compelling reason for oversight	Overall	R	Ind	D
Oversight would lead to greater accountability for lawmakers and public officials	58	57	60	58
Oversight would help ensure laws and regulations are followed more closely and effectively	47	50	41	48
Oversight would help ensure that taxpayer money is spent better	32	31	37	29
Oversight would help build your trust in government	29	30	27	30
Oversight is needed because people are inherently dishonest	23	20	23	25
Don't know	6	6	6	6

The most concerning potential elements with oversight are that oversight efforts are not equally applied and fairly enforced (50%) and that they are politically motivated by the party in power (43%).

Concerns about Oversight	Overall	R	Ind	D
Oversight is not equally applied and fairly enforced	50	51	54	49
Oversight efforts are politically motivated by the party in power	43	40	47	42
Oversight efforts do not change lawmaker behavior in the future	25	28	24	25
Oversight efforts lead to red tape and waste taxpayer money	19	21	18	18
Oversight efforts do not lead to a clear resolution in most cases	17	21	17	14
Too much oversight would keep good people from running for office	15	14	13	17
Too much oversight would keep good people from working in government	11	11	9	13
Don't know	8	5	8	10
None of the above	3	3	3	3

Motivation for Oversight

A plurality of the electorate (45%) views oversight efforts as ways to legitimately investigate cases of wrongdoing rather than partisan-motivated efforts (29%), with a significant percentage being undecided (26%). This perception is shared across party. Even though a plurality has this perception, it is concerning that less than 50% views oversight as legitimate ways to investigate wrongdoing and with large percentages being undecided. With that context, a central focus of the messaging will need to be to define the value of oversight to get above 50% of voters saying oversight efforts are indeed a means to legitimately investigate wrongdoing. This presents a key opportunity.

In terms of oversight efforts, do you think these are partisan-motivated efforts that lead to more red tape and cost to taxpayers, or ways to legitimately investigate cases of wrongdoing?	Overall	R	Ind	D
Partisan-motivated efforts	29	36	22	30
Ways to legitimately investigate cases of wrongdoing	45	44	43	48
Don't Know	26	20	35	23

The mixed reaction to the effectiveness of oversight is reflected in the following descriptions from the focus groups:

Republican: The process is a good process. I'm glad the process is there. The problem is with a lot of these things is that they turn into witch hunts and cost a lot of money and never go anywhere.

Independent: Oversight seems like a lot of the times if they start overdoing it, it's going to basically create another whole thing that we're going to have to criticize and kind of watch the oversighters, if you will. It's going to create a whole bunch of new spending. ... At times, the people in the oversight, they all have their good intentions, but then when they get into the political arena there, they've got to play the game.

Democrat: [Oversight is] doing what's right and fair to the majority and a strong conscience of the individuals.

Democrat: Officials getting together on projects with lots of meetings with very little action. Committees with very little solutions. So, in other words, all us little people which, I agree with, are electing these representatives to get on committees that do the complete opposite of what we asked them to do. So, when I hear oversight in committee, I die inside a little bit.

In looking at trust in government among the three groups (the 29% who believe these are partisan motivated, 45% who see it as ways to legitimately investigate wrongdoing, and the 26% who are undecided on this question), there are some important distinctions. The undecided have the lowest trust in government.

Trust in government (1-9 scale with 1 being that you do not trust it at all, 5 being that you are neutral, and 9 being that you trust it a great deal)	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Mean	4.17	4.44	4.07	4.03

Similarly, as shown in the chart below, the undecided group on this question has a slightly lower than average confidence in the current level of accountability (4.26), compared to voters overall (4.44). Additionally, this group of undecided voters has the lowest confidence in how well they are able to hold lawmakers accountable (7-57 well-not well).

Accountability of lawmakers and public officials to citizens (1-9 scale with 1 being not accountable at all, 5 neutral, and 9 being very accountable)	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Mean	4.44	4.65	4.41	4.26

In terms of a demographic breakdown, the undecided group contains more independents (28%) and voters who identified as something else (10%) than either the partisan or legitimate groups and the overall electorate. This group also contains more moderates (48%) and voters with at most a high school education (31%) than the other two groups or the overall electorate. The racial breakdown of this group and those seeing oversight efforts as legitimate, closely matches the racial composition of the overall electorate, while the group seeing oversight efforts as partisan tends to have more white voters (see Appendix). Additionally, the undecided group contains a larger percentage of women (68%) compared to the other two groups.

Transparency

Current Level of Transparency

Views about the current level of transparency in the federal government and the level of government information that is currently available (4.16 on a 1-9 scale) are comparable to overall trust in government, confidence in the effectiveness of oversight, and the current level of accountability, with Republicans (4.50) and Democrats (4.19) viewing the government as somewhat more transparent and available than independents (3.74).

Transparency of federal government (scale of 1-9 with 1 being not transparent and available at all, 9 very transparent and available)	Overall	R	Ind	D
Mean	4.16	4.50	3.74	4.19

Most Compelling Reason for Transparency

Similar to what we observed with oversight, the most compelling reason for transparency relates to accountability, with the most compelling reason being that having access of information makes government more accountable to the people (53%). Across party, the most compelling reasons for transparency are generally the same.

Most compelling reason for transparency	Mean	R	Ind	D
Having access to information makes government more accountable to the people	53	56	53	52
Having access to information allows voters to have more insight into the governing process and know what is going on	37	34	37	39
Having access to information helps the public understand who is influencing government decision-makers	37	36	37	38
Having access to information allows you and other taxpayers to see how your tax money is being used	32	34	33	29

Most compelling reason for transparency	Mean	R	Ind	D
Having access to information enables the public to make their own informed decisions	31	31	30	32
Don't know	6	6	6	5

In the focus groups, many associated the concept of transparency with openness, visibility, and communication. They felt having such information would be empowering and, consistent with the belief that the most compelling reason for transparency is making government accountable to the people, saw it as key to building trust.

Independent: I believe that live, accurate, easy-to-digest-and-find information is empowering. I think that's very important and that's what ties it to transparency. I don't think there's really any excuse for us not to have as much information as possible right now with how much technology is out there to disseminate that information.

Independent: There should be transparency, because without that, there is no trust.

Belief Statements

On the series of belief statements, all the statements are believed by large margins, but as we heard in the focus groups, there is not necessarily disagreement with general concepts but rather questions about the realistic possibility of implementation.

- *You have a right to know what the government is doing. Government information belongs to the public (85-7 believe-do not believe, 60% strongly believe).*
- *Except for certain national security information, government information should be transparent and available to the public as taxpayers (85-7 believe-do not believe, 56% strongly believe).*

Here are two related quotes about this belief statement from the focus groups:

Middle income voter: Secrecy is fine when the military is involved, but for general policy there should be transparency so you could hold the political figure accountable for what he voted for or implemented.

Independent voter: I think transparency is something that we all want from our government, with the exception of national security.

- *Democracy is harmed when lawmakers or public officials act in their personal interests instead of the public interest (84-6 believe-do not believe, 64% strongly believe).*
- *Democracy is harmed when decisions are made in secret (81-7 believe-do not believe, 52% strongly believe).*
- *If lawmakers and public official are accountable, it will improve their performance in issue areas like the economy, health care and education (80-10 believe-do not believe, 47% strongly believe).*

Enforcement vs. New Laws

In terms of whether enforcement of existing laws is enough or whether new laws are needed in addition to enforcement, the electorate seems open toward new laws (52%) rather than only enforcement of existing laws (34%), but the desire for new laws is driven more by Democrats (27-61 enforcement-new laws) than Republicans, who are more evenly split on this question (45-45).

Other Important Concepts

Checks and Balances

Checks and balances are not viewed as working well in the country today (21-62 well-not well), and this is the view across party (26-60 among Republicans, 16-65 among independents, and 22-62 among Democrats). While this is a concept that most voters agree on, it is not as high a priority in concerns about government as other concerns are.

In the focus groups, checks and balances were seen as closely related to the other concepts of accountability, oversight and transparency, and as a means of promoting fairness and avoiding excess.

Democrat: Checks and balances creates a foundation of trust in government because it fosters accountability. There are consequences for actions, changing regulations, breaking laws, et cetera.

Republican: It keeps rogue elements from running one way or another. It promotes fairness, it avoids excesses, and it really functions best, in the long run, to keep things fair and balanced.

Middle income: I think our founding fathers knew that there was corruption within man's heart and that's why they built it in there, because they knew it existed then, too. So, they knew the way it was, and they were trying to build that in so the government would be able to keep running because everyone is checking on everyone else.

Democrat: That's one of the pillars of our democracy.

Drain the Swamp

The term "draining the swamp" tends to be associated with stopping government corruption (31%) and restoring honesty and ethics in government (23%). These two items tend to be the top two among most groups. Among independents, in addition to stopping government corruption, the concept of stopping the special deals for special interests (25%) is somewhat higher than restoring honesty and ethics (21%).

Meaning of drain the swamp	Overall	R	Ind	D
Stop government corruption	31	34	29	30
Restore honesty and ethics in government	23	26	21	23
Stop the special deals for special interests	19	15	25	17
Kick out the politicians that say one thing but do another	17	18	13	20
Term limits for Congress	14	18	13	10
End the revolving door where politicians get lucrative financial deals upon leaving government	13	14	14	13
Reduce the number of government bureaucrats	13	15	13	10
Get money out of politics	13	11	14	13
Limit the role of lobbyists	9	5	11	11
Reduce the size of government	9	10	9	8
Reduce the influence of elites	8	6	10	9
Don't know	8	4	8	10
Support the president's policies and priorities	7	9	6	7
Restore the rule of law	6	7	5	5
Eliminate gerrymandering of legislative districts	6	3	6	7

In the focus groups, the concept of “drain the swamp” was seen as a way to remove bad elements or actors. However, they saw practical difficulties with its implementation.

Republican: Draining of the swamp means getting rid of the bad elements, get rid of the fungus. There's plenty of it out there. First of all, when you originally set up Congress and everything it was people, men, that gave their time and their treasure and they came into the city and they gave so many years of their lives, and then they went back to their farms. This is not meant to be a profession. There need to be term limits. There need to be rules on that because, otherwise, these people are in it for their own good.

Middle income: I think stagnant water, get rid of the old boys' club, and fresh eyes, fresh ideas.

Republican: I agree with the concept, but practically, it is difficult to do.

Proposals

The survey included a variety of proposals related to oversight, accountability and transparency, with respondents being asked to rate each one on a scale of 1-9 with 1 being not important at all, 5 neutral and 9 being extremely important. From the list, the top tier of most important proposals are as follows:

- *Require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards (7.77)*
- *Ensure the government keeps records of official business (7.59)*
- *Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about (7.58)*
- *Require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them (7.57)*
- *Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their jobs without interference (7.55)*
- *Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence (7.55)*
- *Oversee whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources (7.54)*

Proposals by Party

While the proposals are generally important across all voters groups, there are some slightly different priorities in proposals by party. For example, although all isolate *require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards* as the most important proposal, their priorities as to what else should be in this top tier of proposals diverge.

Republicans identify *ensure the government keeps records of official business* as the second most important proposal (7.80) followed by *ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence* (7.62).

Democrats, on the other hand, isolate proposals relating to potential financial benefits from legislation (*require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them*, 7.68; *prevent lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit financially from their policy decisions*, 7.61); government investigation of wrongdoing (*ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference*, 7.65); and to *prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about* (7.65) in their top tier of proposals.

Like Democrats, independents also include requiring lawmakers and public officials exempt themselves from voting on issues from which they would financially benefit (7.58), and also included overseeing whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest or misuse federal resources (7.59). The prioritization of the remainder of the proposals, however, is relatively consistent across voter groups.

Proposals (1-9 scale with 1 being not important at all, 5 being neutral, and 9 being extremely important)	Mean	R	Ind	D
Require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards	7.77	7.96	7.75	7.68
Ensure the government keeps records of official business	7.59	7.80	7.47	7.55
Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about	7.58	7.57	7.54	7.65
Require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them	7.57	7.49	7.58	7.68
Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence	7.55	7.62	7.55	7.53
Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference	7.55	7.48	7.55	7.65
Oversee whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources	7.54	7.57	7.59	7.51
Implement greater protection for whistleblowers so that government employees can blow the whistle on waste, fraud, and abuse	7.48	7.41	7.53	7.53
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit financially from their policy decisions	7.46	7.36	7.42	7.61
Official Congressional activities, such as hearings and decisions about legislative drafting, should be open and transparent	7.39	7.46	7.31	7.42
Stop foreign attempts to interfere in our elections	7.37	7.29	7.24	7.57
Ensure the public has access to accurate information (excluding legitimately classified information) to make informed decisions about current and future military conflicts	7.36	7.38	7.38	7.35
Improve compliance and enforcement of lobbying and campaign finance disclosure and contribution limits	7.35	7.38	7.36	7.34
Require senior government officials to disclose who they meet with for official purposes	7.32	7.34	7.22	7.41
Implement greater compliance with requests for information, including FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests	7.30	7.28	7.35	7.31
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from making policy decisions affecting organizations they previously worked for	7.26	7.23	7.25	7.32
Require email and electronic communications of lawmakers and public officials be preserved and are made part of the public record	7.15	7.31	7.11	7.07
Ensure that government decisions based on science are transparent	7.09	7.09	7.02	7.14
Reduce unnecessary national security secrecy and overclassification	6.80	6.83	6.67	6.89

There are also some differences in terms of policy priorities based on whether voters saw oversight efforts as partisan or legitimate. While both also prioritize requiring lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards, those who see oversight efforts as partisan also prioritize the government keeping records of official business and overseeing whether lawmakers have conflicts of interest. Those who see oversight efforts as legitimate prioritize preventing the creation of secret laws and ensuring that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence. Those who aren't sure how to view oversight efforts prioritize that investigations of lawmaker wrongdoing can proceed without interference and requiring that lawmakers exempt themselves from voting on issues that might uniquely financially benefit them.

Proposals (1-9 scale with 1 being not important at all, 5 being neutral, and 9 being extremely important)	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't Know
Require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards	7.89	7.96	7.32
Ensure the government keeps records of official business	7.71	7.78	7.13
Oversee whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources	7.70	7.72	7.05
Require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them	7.67	7.74	7.17
Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about	7.67	7.82	7.07
Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence	7.58	7.80	7.09
Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference	7.52	7.78	7.20
Official Congressional activities, such as hearings and decisions about legislative drafting, should be open and transparent	7.51	7.60	6.89
Implement greater protection for whistleblowers so that government employees can blow the whistle on waste, fraud, and abuse	7.50	7.76	6.99
Improve compliance and enforcement of lobbying and campaign finance disclosure and contribution limits	7.45	7.62	6.78
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit financially from their policy decisions	7.43	7.70	7.08
Require senior government officials to disclose who they meet with for official purposes	7.42	7.54	6.81
Ensure the public has access to accurate information (excluding legitimately classified information) to make informed decisions about current and future military conflicts	7.41	7.59	6.92
Stop foreign attempts to interfere in our elections	7.40	7.62	6.91
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from making policy decisions affecting organizations they previously worked for	7.39	7.46	6.76
Implement greater compliance with requests for information, including FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests	7.38	7.54	6.78

Proposals (1-9 scale with 1 being not important at all, 5 being neutral, and 9 being extremely important)	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't Know
Require email and electronic communications of lawmakers and public officials be preserved and are made part of the public record	7.24	7.33	6.74
Ensure that government decisions based on science are transparent	7.10	7.34	6.64
Reduce unnecessary national security secrecy and overclassification	6.85	7.08	6.27

Impact of Proposals

The overall set of proposals would be viewed as helping raising the level of accountability of lawmakers and public officials (68% help, 8% hurt, 9% no impact) and building voter trust in government and the governing process (68% help, 6% hurt, 12% no impact).

Impact of Proposals on raising the the level of accountability	Overall	R	Ind	D
Help	68	71	65	69
Hurt	8	6	9	9
No impact	9	11	7	9
Don't know	15	12	19	13
Impact of proposals on building trust in government and the governing process	Overall	R	Ind	D
Help	68	75	61	68
Hurt	6	4	6	9
No impact	12	11	14	12
Don't know	13	10	19	11

The next chart shows which proposals are the most important among those who felt that the set of proposals would help, hurt or have no impact on accountability and trust in government.

Proposals (1-9 scale with 1 being not important at all, 5 being neutral, and 9 being extremely important)	Accountability			Trust In Government		
	Help	Hurt	No Impact	Help	Hurt	No Impact
Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about	8.12	5.93	6.55	8.04	6.22	6.65
Implement greater protection for whistleblowers so that government employees can blow the whistle on waste, fraud, and abuse	7.96	5.75	6.71	7.90	5.98	6.86
Require senior government officials to disclose who they meet with for official purposes	7.79	5.90	6.48	7.69	6.23	6.66
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from owning businesses that might benefit financially from their policy decisions	7.94	5.98	6.67	7.87	6.09	6.82

Proposals (1-9 scale with 1 being not important at all, 5 being neutral, and 9 being extremely important)	Accountability			Trust In Government		
	Help	Hurt	No Impact	Help	Hurt	No Impact
Require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them	8.07	5.88	6.92	7.98	6.17	6.95
Prevent lawmakers and public officials from making policy decisions affecting organizations they previously worked for	7.74	5.63	6.51	7.66	5.74	6.65
Improve compliance and enforcement of lobbying and campaign finance disclosure and contribution limits	7.90	5.52	6.56	7.81	5.90	6.47
Implement greater compliance with requests for information, including FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests	7.80	5.63	6.43	7.71	5.70	6.62
Reduce unnecessary national security secrecy and overclassification	7.16	5.79	6.54	7.07	6.21	6.41
Ensure that government decisions based on science are transparent	7.54	5.57	6.47	7.46	5.80	6.45
Require email and electronic communications of lawmakers and public officials be preserved and are made part of the public record	7.64	5.41	6.29	7.54	5.70	6.42
Official Congressional activities, such as hearings and decisions about legislative drafting, should be open and transparent	7.91	5.57	6.71	7.85	5.83	6.52
Require all lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards	8.29	5.69	7.03	8.26	5.85	6.93
Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence	8.12	5.77	6.57	8.02	6.00	6.66
Oversee whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources	8.06	5.71	6.79	7.97	6.04	6.87
Ensure the government keeps records of official business	8.10	5.52	6.88	8.04	5.93	6.82
Ensure the public has access to accurate information (excluding legitimately classified information) to make informed decisions about current and future military conflicts	7.81	5.88	6.70	7.78	6.00	6.63
Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference	8.09	5.98	6.58	8.01	5.83	6.73
Stop foreign attempts to interfere in our elections	7.91	5.68	6.27	7.86	5.89	6.39

For those saying the proposals would help accountability, proposals that are most important are:

- Require lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards (8.29).
- Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence (8.12).
- Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about (8.12).
- Ensure the government keeps records of official business (8.10).
- Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference (8.09).
- Require lawmakers and public officials to exempt themselves from voting on issues that would uniquely financially benefit them (8.07).
- Oversee whether lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interests or misuse federal resources (8.06).

Among those who believe the proposals would help trust in government, the priority proposals are:

- Require lawmakers and public officials to follow the same ethics standards (8.26).
- Prevent the creation of secret laws that the public does not know about (8.04).
- Ensure the government keeps records of official business (8.04).
- Ensure that government decisions are transparent and based on the best available evidence (8.02).
- Ensure that officials who are investigating wrongdoing of lawmakers and public officials are able to do their job without interference (8.01).

Challenges with Implementation

While there was generally a positive reaction in many of the focus groups to the set of proposals, many identified realistic challenges with implementation and enforcement with too many items being pursued. This introduces a need for focus on some of the proposals as priorities.

Republican: I think there's just too many moving pieces that I don't know what would happen.

Republican: There's a lot of things that could go wrong, and there's really no way to enforce it. I don't know how you could.

Interest in Becoming Involved with NGO Activities

Even though non-governmental nonprofit organizations are not viewed as having the largest role nor the most trusted in holding lawmakers accountable, there is openness and potential interest if NGOs could offer ways to get involved to work toward greater accountability (64-14 interested-not interested). The largest percentage are somewhat interested (40%) rather than very interested (24%), with only 14% saying they were not interested. By party, Republicans and Democrats are

more interested (68-11 interested-not interested among Republicans with 27% very interested; 65-14 among Democrats with 25% very interested), while independents are interested but to a lesser extent (59-18, 19% very interested).

If non-governmental nonprofit organizations could offer ways for you to get involved to work toward greater accountability in government, would you be very interested, somewhat interested, somewhat not interested, not interested at all?	Overall	R	Ind	D
Very interested	24	27	19	25
Somewhat interested	40	40	40	40
Don't know	22	22	23	21
Somewhat not interested	10	8	13	10
Not interested at all	4	3	5	4
Total interested	64	68	59	65
Total not interested	14	11	18	14

Reflecting their own self-perceived role as having the largest role in holding lawmakers accountable, voting is the activity with which the electorate would be most interested in getting involved (69%). As one Democratic voter described his preferred method of taking action, *“I think the bottom line is that the people have to keep getting back up and our only weapon is the vote.”* Voting is followed by signing a petition (34%), having the ability to comment on a government rule or regulation before it goes into effect (24%), and calling your Member of Congress (16%).

Activities that would most interest them (two choices)	Mean	R	Ind	D
Voting	69	73	63	70
Signing a petition	34	34	32	34
Having the ability to comment on a government rule or regulation before it goes into effect	24	21	33	21
Calling your member of Congress	16	15	18	15
Open meetings	10	12	13	7
Protesting	8	6	5	11
Going to a town hall	7	8	7	7
Joining a national organization	6	5	7	6
Following and commenting on issues through social media	6	4	9	5
Running for office	4	4	4	4
Donating to a political campaign	4	2	3	5

Opportunity for Engagement

As we heard in the focus groups, voters want to engage but do feel some sense of powerlessness, and many struggled to reconcile the belief that positive change could be made with not knowing what they personally could do to engage in the process, outside of voting.

Democrat: How can us as voters push oversight and accountability onto people? A perfect example is the police brutality. I get beat up by a cop, someone beat up by a cop, we protest, we do all this stuff, up and down. Happens next week. We protest, we do it again, it keeps going, it happens again next week. We do all these things but, it's like how can we push that accountability? How can we get that oversight?

Middle income: A lot of people that I have to talked to who don't vote, and I try to discourage them that it does matter, they say, "No, it doesn't." And they feel our voice doesn't matter. And I say, "But we have this right." And they're like, "It doesn't work." So, they think it doesn't work.

Voters need to have a role to play in the process in order to feel engaged. While this current sense of powerlessness does present a challenge, it also presents an opportunity to define new ways for voters to participate and mobilize as citizens. Engaging voters on these issues and providing concrete ways for them to become involved and mobilized is a significant opportunity to not only improve democracy and citizen engagement, but to also make greater accountability in government a reality.

Methodology

This document is a summary of findings from the national survey conducted February 15-16 among 1000 registered voters.

In October 2017, four focus groups were conducted in Orlando, FL and Pittsburgh, PA. The Orlando groups, Independents and Republicans, were conducted October 12. The Pittsburgh groups, conducted October 17, included Democrats and middle income voters.

Appendix

Concerns about Government by Party

Concerns about government	Mean	R	Ind	D
Lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do	7.62	7.70	7.69	7.53
Lack of accountability	7.59	7.53	7.71	7.57
The way Congress spends my money	7.57	7.47	7.72	7.57
Lack of compliance with ethics rules by lawmakers and public officials	7.41	7.26	7.47	7.52
Decisions being made in secret	7.40	7.19	7.41	7.60
Influence of special interests	7.31	7.27	7.46	7.25
Lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest that are not disclosed	7.26	7.10	7.37	7.36
Lack of enforcement of laws and regulations	7.19	7.51	6.80	7.25
Effectiveness of oversight of government activities	7.11	7.08	7.24	7.08
Your voice is not being heard	7.06	6.81	7.09	7.27
Career politicians	7.05	7.47	6.92	6.81
Partisanship	6.80	6.65	7.06	6.76
Whether I have unbiased information to make informed decisions	6.65	6.86	6.53	6.55
Ability to access government information	6.64	6.62	6.52	6.75
Too much power is concentrated in the executive branch	6.59	5.88	6.52	7.30
Not having a clear understanding of the legislative process	5.92	5.71	5.64	6.35

Concerns about Government by Race

Concerns about government (scale of 1-9 with 1 being does not concern you at all, 5 neutral, 9 extremely concerning to you)	White	African-American	Hispanic
Lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do	7.78	7.46	6.77
Lack of accountability	7.73	7.40	6.81
The way Congress spends my money	7.70	7.38	7.09
Lack of compliance with ethics rules by lawmakers and public officials	7.53	7.11	6.93
Decisions being made in secret	7.44	7.43	7.08
Influence of special interests	7.52	6.67	6.55
Lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest that are not disclosed	7.42	6.90	6.44
Lack of enforcement of laws and regulations	7.27	7.14	6.68
Effectiveness of oversight of government activities	7.12	7.00	6.45
Your voice is not being heard	7.08	7.23	6.77
Career politicians	7.22	6.76	6.48
Partisanship	6.99	6.40	5.81
Whether I have unbiased information to make informed decisions	6.82	6.31	5.87
Ability to access government information	6.64	6.86	6.30
Too much power is concentrated in the executive branch	6.52	6.93	6.61
Not having a clear understanding of the legislative process	5.84	6.45	5.83

Concerns about Government by Age

Concerns about government (scale of 1-9 with 1 being does not concern you at all, 5 neutral, 9 extremely concerning to you)	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Lawmakers and public officials don't play by the same rules that average people do	6.87	7.32	7.72	7.77	8.23
Lack of accountability	6.74	7.34	7.74	7.68	8.22
The way Congress spends my money	6.87	7.33	7.69	7.67	8.12
Lack of compliance with ethics rules by lawmakers and public officials	6.72	7.25	7.30	7.45	8.14
Decisions being made in secret	6.82	7.15	7.44	7.59	7.84
Influence of special interests	6.49	7.03	7.28	7.44	8.06
Lawmakers and public officials have conflicts of interest that are not disclosed	6.77	7.06	7.15	7.33	7.86
Lack of enforcement of laws and regulations	6.56	6.97	7.11	7.40	7.75
Effectiveness of oversight of government activities	6.53	6.88	7.05	7.29	7.65
Your voice is not being heard	6.69	6.77	7.24	7.09	7.38
Career politicians	6.42	6.73	7.12	7.15	7.65
Partisanship	6.10	6.52	6.72	7.00	7.49
Whether I have unbiased information to make informed decisions	6.34	6.44	6.55	6.61	7.19
Ability to access government information	6.35	6.56	6.65	6.66	6.88
Too much power is concentrated in the executive branch	6.46	6.72	6.37	6.60	6.78
Not having a clear understanding of the legislative process	6.22	6.06	5.73	5.72	5.97

Demographic Breakdown - Motivation for Oversight

Party Identification	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Republican	33	41	32	26
Democrat	37	37	39	33
Independent	24	21	23	28
Other	5	1	5	10
Ideology	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Liberal	26	28	29	17
Moderate	38	32	37	48
Conservative	35	39	34	33
Education	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Did not complete HS/HS graduate	19	10	18	31
Some college/associate's degree	30	28	30	32
College graduate	31	34	32	26
Post-graduate study	19	27	19	10
Race	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Hispanic	9	7	9	12
African American	11	9	13	10
Asian	4	4	4	4
White	74	80	72	71
Other	2	1	2	8
Gender	Overall	Partisan	Legitimate	Don't know
Male	48	63	47	32
Female	52	37	53	68